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## Best Practices of Language Teachers Towards Professional Development: Challenges, Changes, and Reflections

Sam Rhoy B. Dela Cruz<sup>1\*</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This research made use of a phenomenological approach to understand profoundly the lived experiences of language teachers towards professional development and optimizing their teacher factors. It aimed to highlight the views of English teachers regarding the teacher factor and professional development, the barriers they encounter in English language teaching, and the ways where they could improve themselves as professional teachers. This qualitative study made use of remote interviews via zoom in analyzing the professional development activities employed by English teachers and the other facets connected to them during the school year 2022-2023. Fifteen (15) English teachers teaching in SUCs or Private HEIs were chosen to be the participants of the study. Semi-structured open-ended questions were asked. Data were manually organized and structured from the interviews and thorough scrutiny of themes and identification of essential features were conducted. It was found that teachers' ongoing reflection, evaluation, and analysis of their own practices are necessary elements of their professional development as these can support them to construct new teaching theories and improve their performances. Therefore, optimizing the teacher factor must be every teacher's hunger, concern, and intended purpose. Such development does not only depend on formal learning, but it can also be self-initiated by teachers.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

The development of a civilized nation highly requires an excellent higher education. It plays a pivotal role in the molding of great leaders in the different spheres of life including government and other professions. The economy of a country is linked to higher education which provides skilled and highly competent manpower for the national economy (Brophy, 2016). Educators are the backbone of institutions including higher education institutions. Its effectiveness is dependent on the quality of the teachers since the structure of the traditional delivery of education has provoked the need for schools to be more flexible in responding to the academic needs of the learners (Barcelona, 2017), especially now in the time of the pandemic. Because of this, educators must be harnessed, developed, and helped so that they may do their jobs effectively and efficiently.

Teacher education programs are set to provide our teachers with the skills, competencies, and certifications required to level up their teaching careers and for promotion purposes (Rao, 2004). The Department of Education, the Commission on Higher Education, and educational institutions provide quality instruction and retention programs so that they may provide training for their own teachers. As Raza & Khawaja (2013) asserted, the primary objective of educational reform can be obtained by making sure that educators are subject matter experts and possess a repertoire of necessary pedagogical skills. The quality of training and activities for teachers and staff in the institution remains to be a major concern in policy-making and educational research (Avila, 2015). There are various activities, skills, knowledge, expertise,

and other characteristics of a teacher that define professional development (Sultana, 2010). These days, different terminologies for professional development is professional learning, which refers to continuous, intensive, and focuses on student learning improvement (Levin, 2014). Continuous professional development (CDP) is a word that is used to explain all interference in which educators engage themselves in the course of their profession. CPD's main objective is to elevate work performance in the classroom and therefore improve learners' academic achievement. Effective programs involving professional development are the ones that engage teachers in learning events that are comparable to authentic scenarios (Bacchus & Grove, 2016). They help teachers make their academic skills and practices in a more organized fashion.

To sustain the quality of English language education in the Philippines, the country has to struggle to address the dilemma. According to Jabbar (2018), Hopkins International Partners reported that the average English proficiency score of a Filipino college graduate was 631.4, based on the metrics of the international standardized test TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). Another international testing center IELTS reported that in 2015, Filipinos gathered a mean score of 6.69 for listening, writing, reading, and speaking English, while Malaysians got the top spot among the Southeast Asian Countries, having a mean score of 6.71. (OECD, 2019) Considering that communication skills are one of the foremost factors that employers consider in hiring, it is regrettable to see these figures. Teachers must cope with a number of factors contributing to the decline of English proficiency in the Philippines: error-

<sup>1</sup> Far Eastern University, Philippines

\* Corresponding author's e-mail: [samrhoydelacruz@gmail.com](mailto:samrhoydelacruz@gmail.com)

riddled textbooks and the teaching being restrained by the capacity of the teachers (Ramos & Aguirre, 2018).

A pressing concern arises: what do English teachers need to do for them to be more effective and abreast with this fast-changing society? What do they need to do to adapt to these disconcerting changes? How can professional development activities help in improving the quality of teaching and learning, therefore contributing to the academic success of the learners?

Self-improvement is a progressing learning process. This learning process is continuing and endless. A teacher may have realized certain growth; nevertheless, learning in the course of life must continue. In this dynamically changing world, preparing young minds to be prolific citizens is a game changer. Therefore, continuing professional development of teachers must be deeply investigated.

### Research Objectives

The following research objectives were focused on in this study:

1. To determine the professional development activities in which teachers are engaged;
2. To find out the relevance of the different professional development activities as perceived by teachers;
3. To contrast teachers' involvement in professional development and the perceived;
4. To explore teachers' opinions about skills to be focused on in their future training;
5. To scrutinize obstacles that are affecting the professional development of university English teachers.

### Statement of the Problem

This study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the common barriers to effective English language teaching as experienced by the selected teachers?
2. What are the professional development practices being done by English teachers to optimize teacher effectiveness and upgrade English classroom instruction?
3. As a result of the professional development, how can the overall experiences of English Language teachers be specified in terms of the quality of teaching?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This research essentially made use of a phenomenological approach to understand profoundly the lived experiences of the informants regarding optimizing their teacher factors through the means of self-improvement. Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Creswell, 2012). It aimed to highlight the views of English teachers regarding the teacher factor, professional development, the barriers they encounter in English language teaching, and the ways where they could improve themselves as professional teachers.

The findings of this study would be further utilized in proposing programs to sustain the inherent drive of the

informants in the performance of their duties regarding being English teachers, achieve the standards of the department, and eventually, meet the needs of these English teachers brought about by the fast-changing ways of living. Further to this, the purpose of this study was to understand the common elements, themes, and patterns of experiences of the informants and how their common experiences can inform change in the educational community.

### Locale and Population of the Study

This study derived information using convenience sampling from the English teachers currently teaching in the Higher Education Institutions in NCR and Bulacan. Fifteen (15) English teachers teaching in SUCs or Private HEIs were chosen to be the participants of the study. Each of them expressed his classroom experiences through the zoom recorded interview.

The following is the list of criteria met by the candidates:

1. The participant should have at least served in the academe for 2 years.
2. The participant should be teaching English.
3. The participant should be teaching in the Higher Education Institution.

### Materials and Instruments

This qualitative study made use of remote interviews via zoom in analyzing the professional development activities employed by English teachers and the other facets connected to them. In obtaining data with regard to how educators perceive their professional development, semi-structured open-ended questions were asked. These teachers were interviewed and asked different questions that aimed to tell their stories of professional development activities, their perceptions, the skills they think they need, and their struggles.

### Data Gathering Procedures

Data were collected before the start of the academic year 2022-2023 using remote interviews via zoom. Remote data collection was conducted to still maintain safety and convenience during the pandemic, and still, be able to clarify elucidations and comprehend the participant's intent and thinking about situations or procedures. With the use of a structured survey and open-ended questions for the interviews, the teacher-participants were able to share their stories of challenges, changes, and reflections in regard to their professional development.

### Data Analysis

When the interviews with the 15 informants were finished, the initial process of analyzing the data was performed. Data were manually organized and structured from the interviews conducted. As a part of the process of transcription, the researcher then listened to the media tool over and over until the text was formed into verbatim transcriptions. Additional comments, which may be pointless or unnecessary, and other generative



facets were removed to sanitize the transcripts. After this, thorough scrutiny of themes and identification of essential features were conducted. This required the process of labeling and categorizing the data. Thereafter, the researcher proceeded to the major step of coding by organizing data into segments and assigning names for them. The researcher read the transcripts and listened to them and determined the meaningful patterns, which led to the discovery of certain phenomena from the informant's experiences. The researcher then further applied thorough and accurate analyses of data, after which directed the analysis of the lived experiences of English teachers regarding their teacher factor and self-improvement, which were embedded in the identified themes from the analysis of data. Eventually, the data were developed according to the common themes and were translated into chapters, which are suited to the purpose of this study.

### Ethical Considerations

The participants' rights, interests, and sensitivities were primarily considered in this study. Participation was purely voluntary, and the participants were allowed to discontinue participation in the study at any time if certain unwarranted incidents arose without reprimand. Participants remained anonymous with the use of pseudonyms and access to the data was confidential and limited only to the researcher and each individual participant. The research design was explained to each participant and prioritizes participants' views, beliefs, and ideas throughout the study.

Participation in this study helped concerned authorities to understand better the English teachers and how to optimize their teacher effectiveness and self-improvement leading to the upgrading of their classroom instruction in English, to create a better system and culture that can be a source of inspiration not just to the English teachers, but to other professionals as well.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Common Issues in the English Classroom

#### Jampacked Curriculum

Many researchers acknowledged the fact that the English primary curriculum in higher education was overloaded making it a major hurdle for effective classroom practice. (Gathumbi 2013) Consequently, there was a distinction between teaching and learning when it came to the concepts being discussed in an English classroom. It was raised that teachers, coerced by the current curriculum, seemed to be teaching more, and students, who are bombarded with "so many" concepts during a session seem to learn less. Some encounters with excessive instructional material were raised in the following accounts:

*"There are too many materials that I need to use in my English classroom. Sometimes they are overwhelmed because of it. The textbook wants me to teach too many concepts for the students, sacrificing the quality."* (English Teacher 6) The curriculum

was packed with so much content that teachers resorted to telling students what they knew, and students simply committed facts to memory (Lujan, 2015). The jam-packed curriculum left little time for students to acquire a deep understanding of the language concept or to develop life-long skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and most especially communication skills (Cardenas, 2018).

### Low Comprehension Level

Citing a very alarming Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 Report released last December 2019, Filipino students obtained an average score of 340 points in Overall Reading Literacy, which was significantly lower than the OECD average of 487 points. Only 1 out of 5 Filipino students (19.4%) achieved at least the minimum proficiency level (Level 2) in Overall Reading Literacy. Moreover, among the participating ASEAN countries, Filipino students performed closest to but significantly behind Indonesian students by 31 points in Overall Reading Literacy. (OECD 2019) This result of an international organization reflected the classroom experiences of the informants. They witnessed the students' difficulty in reading and their struggle in reading and listening comprehension, as expounded in the succeeding accounts:

*"They have problems with the foundations of language. Comprehension is a big problem. Every time I speak, they find it hard to grasp my instruction."* (English teacher 6)

Moreover, the challenges to maintaining a very interactive class abounded because of the learners' comprehension level. How could teachers proceed to the lesson and even facilitate activities if learners did not understand the instructions?

### Prevalence of Struggling Readers

As the problem in reading is delved into in this study, an issue in the system was raised. Some students still passed the basic education level even if the student could not read. Citing a report of Albano (2019), the case was raised because of a roomful of Grade 7 non-readers and frustration level readers in the Sauyo National High School in Novaliches, Quezon City featured in the documentary "Pag-asa sa Pagbasa" in the I-Witness program of GMA 7 on September 1, 2018. Owing to this eye-opener, a memorandum of the DepEd National Capital Region dated September 6, 2018 required the submission of data on the English reading performance of elementary and secondary learners with the report form for high school students having a column for non-readers. Our informants, as stated in the following, witnessed the prevalence of non-readers at the high school level:

*"There are students who are still struggling readers. Imagine they are college students, yet some of them still cannot read certain words. And if they can even read, their comprehension is really poor. This is my main problem."* (English teacher 8)

*"Some of my students in my classroom tend to find it difficult to express themselves in English. It might be because they lack*

vocabulary; especially because they think in Filipino first and then translate it into English. Due to their limited vocabulary bank, therefore it leads to fear in speaking.” (English teacher 14) Since there was an issue with the limited vocabulary skills of the learners, Tagalog-English code-switching was an extensive occurrence in the Philippines, used in oral communication and increasingly even in informal written communication by young, well-educated Filipinos. (Bautista, 2014) Worse, the utilization of the first language in an English classroom was being employed by teachers, simply because they did not have any choice if they wanted to be understood by the learners.

## Enhancement Programs

### Getting a Graduate Degree

Aside from exerting effort to improve these linguistic facets, the most important factor affecting the quality of education was the quality of instruction of the individual teacher in the classroom. There was clear evidence that a teacher’s ability and effectiveness are the most influential determinants of student achievement. (Maende, 2013)

“The reality of teaching is that we never stop learning.” (English teacher 1) Teacher professional development has a high influence on student motivation, teaching methodologies, communication skills, and organization of content and planning of lessons and a very high influence on students’ participation during lessons, teacher confidence, and knowledge of the subject matter. Therefore informants also mentioned the significance of continuing professional development to further hone their teacher factor, as stated in the following accounts:

“As an English teacher, I pursue my Master’s Degree in English Language Education. It did open a whole new world of teaching for me.” (English teacher 11)

### Attending Seminars and Workshops

Aside from enrolling in a graduate degree, other professional development courses designed to improve teacher effectiveness were regularly offered by the different organizations to further help in upgrading the quality of teachers here in the country. In fact, in the experience of our informants, it was to their advantage:

“It is good that I receive opportunities to go to seminars and workshops. I could get techniques, trends, and different sorts of experiences because of it. The learnings and takeaways I can get from seminars and workshops and other training are the ones that I am applying in my classroom.” (English teacher 2)

As supported by another informant, attending In-Service Training (INSET) upgrade them as teachers, feeling like a mobile phone having a software update. This was stated in the following accounts:

“We do undergo training provided by the school and apply these things in class. Aside from the bi-annual in-service training, there are different seminars/workshops that I attend. They do upgrade me as a teacher. It is like getting a software update. After the process, I feel new. I feel faster and I feel more optimized like an upgraded device.” (English teacher 5)

## Consulting Mentors

More importantly, aside from these professional development schemes, the more traditional way of being trained was what other informants do to upgrade their teacher factor. That is they consult their mentors and ask for advice. This was stated in the following encounter:

“I make sure that I find time to consult my mentor on how else I can augment my teacher factor and be a better educator overall. They are the experts on this craft, that is why consulting them is a great idea.” (English teacher 3)

It was believed that wisdom comes with age. There were things that were not experienced by the teachers but already encountered by the mentors and those teachers were more experienced by age. Through that, things that could be done and could be avoided can be identified.

## Conducting Feedback and Self-Evaluation

Separately, another great practice being employed by some informants is asking for constructive feedback from the students. Constructive feedback is delivering valuable comments and recommendations that contribute to a positive teaching result, a better process, or improved behaviors. It provides inspiration, provision, measures, and direction to the teacher receiving it. Knowing how to ask for constructive feedback is a valuable skill. This way, strengths and points for improvement in the perspective of the learners can be determined.

“I always do self-evaluation about my classes. I make sure to always be open to constructive criticism, especially during class observations or even just regular teaching sessions. I sometimes do random interviews about how well my classes went.” (English teacher 4)

## Best Practices of Language Teachers

### Quality Planning

The informants greatly exclaimed the importance of quality lesson planning in their classrooms. As supported by a study by Dorovolomo *et al.* (2010), which aimed to investigate whether there was a relationship between the quality of lesson planning and its successful implementation, it was found that there was a positive correlation between the quality of lesson planning and the quality of delivery. This validated the important place lesson planning should have in English classrooms, or in any other classroom, considering it as a crucial area of prospective teachers’ professional development and teacher effectiveness. Therefore, teacher planning served as an antidote to solve and further avoid other issues in the English classroom as stated in the succeeding accounts:

“I need to get to know my students and identify their interests and needs, then design my lesson accordingly to avoid having a boring class.” (English teacher 1)

The informant identified the need to know the student’s needs and current level, to provide comprehensible input, a lesson that was understandable and beneficial for the students.

## Strategic Innovation

Through innovations and other modern methodologies

in teaching the language, English teachers could facilitate an interactive English class to improve their students (Bustos-rosa, 2008). Effort in planning and in looking for modern and trendy methodologies was required to be able to execute good class instruction, as manifested in the following statement: *“I have been doing great efforts to address the problems and issues I face in my classroom. I do prepare a lot and frequently talk to my head to support me in the efforts and other projects I will execute to enhance the skills of my students.”* (English teacher 3) Indeed, teachers who allotted time in innovating their classroom instruction could see the difference in classroom instruction between a very traditional to an innovative classroom. One particular example of new methodologies and innovations in an English classroom was the employment of DEAR (Drop Everything and Read).

### Language Immersion

With the application of these scenarios and new methodologies in language teaching, better and broader opportunities to use and be immersed in the language were being provided. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the several issues being faced in an English classroom is that the students did not have enough chances to use the language, whether in speaking or writing, or even reading. According to a study by Al Zoubi (2018), learners should be continually exposed to the English language through different real-life scenarios such as watching English movies and programs, listening to the radio, reading English books, and practicing speaking through different activities. Rightly, as experienced by the informants, opportunities such as these were provided, stated in the following: *“I address the problems in speaking by letting the students use the language in a natural way. I usually provide activities that are relatable for the students, especially daily activities that require them to have a conversation and use the language the way that they can.”* (English teacher 11)

Moreover, teachers and parents should raise learners' awareness towards the importance of learning the English language through exposure to the language daily using different techniques that could enhance second language acquisition, further motivating them and encouraging them to use the language.

### Summary of Ideas

Regarding the teachers' experiences with their profession and as classroom teachers, many of them expressed their joy whenever students were appreciative and commended their efforts in the class. Teaching the value of the lessons in their lives, according to them, was what transpired during their classes. Moreover, on account of the utilization of the instructional materials, the informants perceived its importance to successfully have a meaningful learning experience in an English classroom. They also said that IMs allow them to further expound on the lesson using different accessible forms of media and different technological tools. However, as they experienced, they also stated the curriculum in

English even the textbooks are so jam-packed, leaving the learners with so many things to accomplish in each period. The issue of textbooks being too difficult for the current level of students also arose.

As to the accounts regarding the different issues being faced in their English classroom, the teachers reported lack of vocabulary, non-readers, and low comprehension level to be the most frequently encountered problems in their classrooms. Because of this, the need for professional development mechanisms arose. Regarding the benefits of teacher factor as perceived and experienced by the teachers, the following are the steps being undertaken to optimize their teacher factor:

- 1) Getting a graduate degree - as experienced by the informants, enrolling in a post-graduate degree such as obtaining their master's or doctorate is being undertaken so as to level up their professional dimensions;
- 2) attending seminars and workshops- voluntarily looking for workshops and seminars in line with Language Teaching and Methodologies do help teachers provide better learning experiences to learners;
- 3) consulting their mentors, superiors, and experts - asking for advice and talking to their superiors and mentors are also done, acknowledging their edge when it comes to classroom experiences;
- 4) conducting feedback analysis and self-evaluation- conducting formal even informal interviews and surveys with students and superiors with regard to their experiences in the English classroom and making self-reflection on how they were taught during the session can also help them in their improvement.

As a result of their efforts in professional development, these are the methods teachers employ to upgrade their English classroom instruction:

- 1) Innovation: through innovations and other modern methodologies in teaching the language, interactive classes can be attained;
- 2) Language Immersion: creating opportunities for the learners to naturally use the language is of primordial importance;
- 3) Quality Planning: the importance of lesson planning in designing a lesson that is suitable for the current level of the students is apparent

In general, English language educators, with their initiatives of self-improvement to optimize their teacher factor, aim to upgrade their English classroom instruction. With the different personalities, backgrounds, skills, and orientations of these Educators, one thing is common among them: their drive for self-improvement to improve their teacher factor is evident.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher professional development is considered one of the most important influences contributing to students' academic achievement among many other facets in the educational field. How satisfactory the teacher teaches and treats the students can have a huge impact on how regularly students attend school. Teachers' ongoing



reflection, evaluation, and analysis of their own practices are necessary elements of their professional development as these can support them to construct new teaching theories and improve their performances.

For an English teacher, this happens when a learner of the English language finally makes sense of a certain grammar, literature, or even pronunciation lesson, and applies them in practical and real-life scenarios! This fulfillment is through developing the necessary life skills that can help the teachers grow in and outside their profession. Even if they are facing multifarious issues in their English classroom, categorically linguistic and non-linguistic problems, they can still provide better outcomes and meaningful learning experiences to their learners. More importantly, they can become resilient to challenges and still be tougher, honed by experiences.

Teacher factor development is an evolving learning process. This learning process is ongoing and endless. Even if a teacher has achieved certain improvements, they still need to learn throughout his whole life and career. In this rapidly changing world, preparing skilled workers and engaged citizens is becoming a game changer.

Therefore, optimizing the teacher factor must be every teacher's hunger, concern, and intended purpose. Such development does not only depend on formal learning, but it can also be self-initiated by teachers. In this case, finding the right teacher factor optimization activities that fit one own needs and preferences remains a necessary decision to make. Whether it is formal or informal, updating their skills and innovating are the pillars of teacher factor optimization. Because of the upgrading of English classroom instruction brought about by the optimized teacher factor, self-improvement should be every teacher's goal, ambition, and intended aim.

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